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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a framework for thinking about the "library" in the year 2001 and predicts that, although the development of new technologies will impact libraries, it will not reduce them to the status of museum artifacts. Three questions are identified as critical areas for delegates to the 1990 New York State Governor's Conference to consider: (1) Who will benefit from the new information technology and who will be left behind? (2) What is the responsibility of local, state, and Federal governments to narrow the gap between the "information haves" and the "information have notes"? and (3) How can libraries help achieve information equity and information justice for all? It is concluded that the challenge facing the delegates is to ensure that every New Yorker has access to the vast knowledge resources that are now available. (MAB)

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The Idea of a Library in 20001

by

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THE IDEA OF A LIBRARY IN 2001

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The library to me was a cathedral of the mind. — Senator Jacob Javits at the 1979 White House Conference on Library and Information Services.

Like the decennial census of the population, White House Conferences on Library and Information Services and the state conferences that precede them are hardly an everyday occurrence. The 1990-91 state and national conferences will be only the second time in history, and the first time in more than a decade, that community leaders, library supporters and information professionals gather to identify citizen information needs and to develop state and national agendas for library and information services in the decade ahead.

"Forecasting," observes the irrepressible Doelger, "is a difficult thing, especially when it deals with the future." And "vision," one might add, "is most commonly achieved in hindsight." Yet the challenge to the delegates to the 1990 New York State Governor's Conference is precisely this: to forge a shared vision of the future information environment for the Empire State and all of its citizens, in their rich diversity and in their infinite variety.

I suggest a framework for thinking about the "library" in the year 2001, when our successors will be packing their suitcases for the Third New York State Governor's Conference on Library and Information Services.

Our State, our nation and all the industrialized nations of the free world have undergone a profound change over the last 30 years. The last quarter of the 20th century has been a time of dramatic transition from a manufacturing-based society to a world economy with its social order centered on services — services that, in turn, depend on data and information. The basic currency of the post-industrial society is information, just as the central focus of the manufacturing society was the conversion of raw materials into finished goods. Electronic information technology (particularly computer and telecommunications technology) is to our generation what the internal combustion engine and the open hearth furnace were to our parents' generation.

The evidence is compelling. Information and data now constitute 25 percent of all world trade (about $50 billion a year). The information and service sector of the U.S. economy has grown to nearly 70 percent of total annual U.S. nonagricultural output, while the goods sector (manufacturing, mining, construction) has declined to only 30 percent. Information workers now represent nearly 70 percent of all the hours worked in the United States. The primary information sector currently accounts for more than half of the combined U.S. and Western European Gross National Product.

The expense side of the information economy ledger is equally impressive. Over 50 percent of all U.S. capital investment is now in information technology. The annual cost of processing information for the Executive Branch of the Federal Government alone is approaching $30 billion. The Federal Government spends $6 billion a year just on information dissemination, not counting the cost of collecting, organizing and analyzing that information, or the capital costs of agency automation. The 1990 Census will cost $2.5 billion. Closer to home, the New York State Government now invests a billion dollars a year in information technology and services.

The information society is upon us. It requires the delegates to the 1990 Governor's Conference to redefine the notion of "library" in light of the knowledge explosion and the revolution in information technology.

Penicillin, beta blockers and antihistamines did not push aspirin alongside leeches in the cabinet of medical curiosities.

Let me first try to dispel the naive and dangerous belief that computers, television, fibre optic, satellite transmission and a dozen other assorted marvels of the semiconductor age will reduce either books or libraries to the status of museum artifacts. In the immortal words of Eliza Doolittle, "Not bloody likely"!

Technological revolutions just don't work that way!

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NEW YORK STATE LIBRARY

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The proof is all around us. The computer no more replaces the book than the Concorde replaces the Boeing 727 or the family automobile. Penicillin, beta blockers and antihistamines did not push aspirin alongside leeches in the cabinet of medical curiosities. Electronic technology simply creates an infinitely richer, more diverse information environment. It provides us with a sometimes bewildering array of choices about how we create, store, organize and distribute messages. These wonderfully powerful new tools vastly extend our power and reach and enable us to choose the suitable medium for the message we wish to create, communicate, read, see or hear.

The most significant phenomenon facing delegates to the 1990 New York Governor's Conference is not the revolution in information technology which will simply continue at its own pace oblivious to resolutions Conference delegates may adopt. It is the dramatic transition, in less than a century and a half, from an era of scarce information to one of overwhelming abundance of data.

The distinction among "data," "information" and "knowledge" are, I think, quite significant here. We are at serious risk of becoming a data-rich but information-poor society. We inhabit the world of T.S. Eliot's denizens of "The Rock" who wonder plaintively:

"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

"Where is the knowedge we have lost in information"?

And, we might add, "where is the information that lies submerged in a bottomless sea of data"?

In a futures study commissioned by the Information Industry Association, Clement Bezold and Robert Olson put the challenge squarely:

The key issue facing our society is the creativity and social problem solving, but the average person knows little about them.[1]

How could it be otherwise, the authors observe, when "ten million adults today lack the information skills of a competent fourth grade student?"[2]

The critical questions before you at the Governor's Conference, in my opinion, are:

1 Who will benefit from the new information technology and who will be left behind?

What is the responsibility of local, state and Federal governments to narrow the gap between the "information haves" and the "information have nots"?

3 How can libraries help achieve information equity and information justice for all?

How shall we think about the social role of New York libraries in the decade ahead? The information revolution demands that we redefine in a very fundamental way not merely the mission of the library or the range of services it provides, but the very notion of a library itself. We must redefine *The Idea of a Library*.

The era of the library as "noble edifice" is at an end. Arthur D. Little Inc., one of the nation's most prestigious management consulting firms, asserts:

> Between now and the year 2000, the idea of a library as defined by *location* or *place* will continue to give way at an accelerating pace to the idea of a library...as *access networks*.[3]

It is no longer useful to think about the library simply as a place where books are kept, or even as an organized collection of objects in which data, information, knowledge and, occassionally, wisdom are stored in a variety of multimedia formats. All of these things are still true, but they are not what is most important about libraries. I propose the following as a working definition of "a library" for the delegates to the 1990 Governor's Conference.

> A library provides continuing, effective and useful access to information stored in all forms and formats and in a variety of locations.

Think of a library as an "information bank." The choice of a bank as the analogy is not accidental. What is important about the notion of a bank is not that is a large stone building with pillars in front and employees who work in cages. What is important is that the bank provides access to money. Indeed, for many people under 30, a bank is a sidewalk automatic teller machine (ATM).

The banking analogy may also be helpful in understanding why we have over 7,000 libraries--public, elementary and secondary school, college and university, hospital, prison, corporate and institutional--in New York State alone. Do we really need all those libraries? If we have a public library with a

children's room, why do we need an elementary school library? One might as readily ask, "if we have a commercial bank in town, why do we need a savings bank, a savings and loan, and a credit union?" The answer to both questions is the same. Because they perform essential but different functions that complement one another. And because the world is complex economically and as an information environment.

Public, school, special and university libraries may, from time to time, serve some of the same clientele, because people of all ages and all social classes today have an insatiable appetite for information. Like money, information now has to be available at different times and places, through multiple points of access. That is why banks, which have become highly competitive and, as a consequence, very customer-oriented, invest so heavily in ATMs. And that is why, in the current information-based society, we must invest much more heavily in expanding and strengthening the state and national information infrastructure.

Think of a library as an "information bank."

It is not in the national interest to permit the erosion of our information base. Our State or our nation cannot afford a two-tier society, where only a handful of the wealthy and the well-educated people are able to enjoy the benefits of information abundance, while citizens of more modest means are deprived of access to the information they need to realize their potential as workers, as informed participants in the democratic process and as inheritors of the intellectual and cultural legacy of nine thousand years of civilization. Above all, we cannot tolerate the continuation of a permanent underclass of information illiterates whose potential contribution to society will forever remain unrealized.

In the words of Theodore Rozak:

> In the libraries of the nation, we have an existing network spread across the society, stationed in every neighborhood and in the charge of experienced people who have always honored a strong ethic of public service. If the equipment for computerized reference facilities were concentrated in local libraries, or better still for reasons of economy, if every local library were linked to a generously funded regional reference center, this would be the fastest and cheapest way for the general public to gain open access to whatever benefits the Information Age may have to offer...Making the democratic most of the Information Age is a matter not only of technology, but also of the social organization of that technology.[4]

This is the challenge to the 1990 New York State Governor's Conference--to create a structure that assures every New Yorker of access to the vast knowledge resources that are now available. That is a formidable challenge. It is exceeded in magnitude only by the size of the opportunity to enhance the quality of life that modern information technology provides.

You have only to marshall the collective vision, courage and wisdom to reach out and seize that opportunity and to begin the process of translating it into a reality. Howard Bowen reminds us that "stating the ideals is, of course, not the same as achieving them, but it is a beginning."[5] I urge the delegates to the 1990 Governor's Conference to make just such a beginning.

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